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Nzari's objects in the 21st century: Materiality, emotions, and female agency in the Lower Ramu region of Papua New Guinea

Les objets de Nzari au XXIe siècle : matérialité, émotion et agentivité feminine dans la région du Bas Ramu, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée

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Nzari's objects in the 21st century: materiality, emotions, and female agency in the Lower Ramu region of PNG

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the interplay between materiality, emotions, and female agency in the Bosmun area, located at Papua New Guinea's Lower Ramu River. The material forms that I address by means of an emotion-focused materiality approach relate to a prominent mythical heroine called Nzari. Following local cosmology, Nzari gave women the markers of female identity that are universally considered respected and powerful insignia: fire, clay pots, wooden bowls, paddles, and clubs. Nzari's story and the associated female power thus materializes in a number of objects. Due to wider societal transformations in contemporary Papua New Guinea, Bosmun women today enact emotions, agency, and power in complex and sometimes ambivalent ways in relation to "Nzari's objects." While some of the contents, meanings, and practices relating to these objects have been devalued, the objects themselves do not lose their agency since women continue to emotionally engage with them while making sense of a changing cultural world.

KEYWORDS: Materiality, emotions, female agency, Ramu River, Papua New Guinea

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les interactions entre la matérialité, les émotions et la capacité d'agir féminine dans l'aire Bosmun, située sur le cours inférieur du Ramu en Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée. J'analyse les formes matérielles sous le prisme des sentiments qui se déploient face aux matériaux liés aux relation avec l'héroïne mythique Nzari. Suivant la cosmologie locale, Nzari donna aux femmes les insignes de l'identité féminine, insignes universels, respectés et puissants : le feu, les poteries, les bols en bois, les pagaies et les massues. L'histoire de Nzari et du pouvoir féminins se matérialisent ainsi dans un certain nombre d'objets. De nos jours, à cause des importantes transformations sociales que connait la Papouasie Nouvelle Guinée contemporaine, les femmes de Bosmun manifestent leurs émotions et leur capacité d'agir vis-à-vis « des objets de Nzari » d'une façon parfois complexe et ambivalente. Bien que le sens, le contenu et l'usage de ces objets aient été dévalués, ces objets n'ont cependant pas perdu de leur puissance puisque les femmes continuent à être engagées émotionnellement vis-à-vis d'eux tout en prenant en compte les changements culturels.

MOTS-CLÉS : matérialité, émotions, capacité d'agir féminine, rivière Ramu, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée

To understand female agency, related emotions, and male-female relationships in the Bosmun area of Papua New Guinea, where I have been conducting anthropological research since 2004, one needs to know about the mythical heroine Nzari. Nzari features as a powerful female figure in the mythical narratives of several societies along the North Coast as well as in the Lower Sepik-Ramu inland area. In neighbouring areas Nzari is variously known as Jari (Tamoane, 1977; see also Hogbin [1970] 1996: 34-35; Kulick, 1992: 158; Lipset, 1997: 168; A. Th. von Poser, 2014: 117-122), Zaria (Lutkehaus, 1995) or Daria (Z'Graggen, 1992, 2011; see also Barlow, this issue).

Although she is primarily regarded as being responsible for female affairs, Nzari's story is an epic of human sentiment in general. It is a story about positive and negative empathy, telling about human

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joy, love, and sexuality, male-female harmony, interpersonal kindness, respect, and sympathy, about trust and mistrust, loss, abandonment, and rejection. According to local cosmological knowledge, Nzari gave women the material markers of female identity that are universally considered respected and powerful insignia. Above all, she provided humans with fire and clay pots with which to prepare a proper meal, and she introduced the knowledge of proper childbirth to humankind as well as particular food-related conventions (von Poser, 2013).

Drawing on an approach on materiality which highlights the agency of material forms as well as the dialectical relationships between subjects and objects, I wish to explore the ways in which Bosmun women express their emotions as they refer – either positively or negatively – to the objects of Nzari. Due to wider societal transformations in contemporary Papua New Guinea, Bosmun women today enact emotions, agency, and power in complex and presumably much more ambivalent ways in relation to "Nzari's objects" than did women in the past. Depending on the role they take as modern businesswomen, church attendees, or household members in daily family life, they interchangeably value and devalue these objects and the related ideals and practices. While some of the contents, meanings, and practices relating to Nzari's objects are being devalued, the objects themselves do not lose agency, since the women continue to refer to them while creatively claiming their position in a changing cultural world.

After explaining the way in which I conceptualize materiality, emotions, and agency, a short ethnographic description of the Bosmun area, as well as a portrayal of Nzari as the patroness of Bosmun womanhood are given. This will provide the proper context in which to set my exploration of women's engagements with Nzari's objects in order to reveal how emotions in a 21st century Ramu River world are negotiated and materially mediated.

Materiality, agency, and emotions

The conceptual lens that I pursue in this essay embarks from recent approaches to materiality as proposed by Alfred Gell (1998) and other scholars interested in a critical reformulation of anthropology's conceptual engagement with material culture (e.g. Appadurai, 1986; Latour 1999, 2004; Miller, 2005; Lemonnier, 2012). Put simply, material objects or artworks are not just pragmatic and/or aesthetic products of humanity. They are not just something solid that humans either need to or love to be surrounded by. Rather, humanity is constantly negotiated within processes of cultural production within which objects play a highly active role. Even the more or less mundane objects of everyday life, in fact,

> "render tangible or actualise in a performative way important aspects of social organisation, culture, systems of thought, or actions." (Lemonnier, 2012: 14)

Alfred Gell (1998), in his posthumously published work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, was prominent in paving the way about the consideration of objects as social agents and thus in fact as subjects. Indeed, objects are imbued with an agency because humans make use of them in order to mediate their own agency through them. Also, if objects do not function (for whatever reasons) as humans expect them to, humans are prompted by these objects to redirect their own agency (Svašek, 2012: 14). This new perspective on materiality thus does not focus on analyzing

> "human bodies or material forms, but rather the relations between them." (Grønseth, 2012: 119)

In making attempts to overcome dualistic modes of thought, according to which subjects and objects appear as diametrically opposed poles, materiality scholars thus also pay attention to the fact that

> "[a] strict analytic distinction between subjects and objects is problematic as people in specific times and places experience different levels of permeability between themselves and the world around them." (Svašek, 2012: 19-20; see also, for instance, Leach, 2002)

For the people of the Bosmun area, for example, objects, especially those relating to food consumption, production, and distribution, were thought to be the material extensions of persons. Being both a psychological and culinary anthropologist who is also inspired by phenomenology (see also Sutton, 2001), my analytic interest regarding Bosmun ethnography has mainly pertained to the cultural dimensions of emotional processes and how these variously become enacted in social, moral, and embodied ways and by means of food-related actions and interactions. I basically refer to emotions as culturally and physically constituted processes of feeling which unfold in accordance with distinct, yet interrelated discourses and practices as well as with embodied experiences (e.g. Röttger-Rössler & Markowitsch, 2009; Svašek, 2012; von Poser, 2018). Such discourses, practices, and embodied experiences, in turn, often evolve in relation to specific objects, as shown in my analysis of how Bosmun emotionally engage with food-related objects (von Poser, 2013). Eating spoons, food bowls, or sago scrapers were the most salient and socially recognizable objects that would serve my interlocutors as mementos for beloved persons who had died, thus evoking memories of past relationships (see also Lohmann, 2010) and thereby affecting people's emotions in powerful ways.

Despite focusing on migration, mobility, and transnationalism rather than on the more local-

ized lives that my interlocutors have been leading, psychological anthropologist Maruška Svašek has, in her introduction to the volume *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions,* similarly stated that

> "objects and images […] have the potential to actively trigger a myriad of feelings,"

and that through our engagement with them,

> "attachments [as part and parcel of emotional processes] can be strengthened, hampered or undermined." (Svašek, 2012: 13)

According to the social, cultural, economic or political context, some objects are certainly considered more important than others. Be that as it may, objects per se do have the quality of being or becoming salient points of reference in the understanding of the world. For,

> "[p]eople are partially responsive to the power of objects because they have learnt to perceive the world in a particular way. Meaning and impact, in other words, are embedded in, and produced by, perceptual and sensorial interaction with the material environment." (Svašek, 2012: 15)

The range of objects that I present are said to have been brought into existence by Nzari, and they were believed to trigger feelings of well-being, pride, and power in Bosmun women. Men also took pride in them as they produced some of these objects (above all, wooden carved objects). Today, however, women as well as men act out agency and power in presumably more ambivalent ways in relation to "Nzari's objects." Depending on their social roles, their aspirations to participate in capitalist accumulation (von Poser, 2017), and their subjective positions and motivations, women as well as men sometimes value these objects because of the connections these have to local cosmologies, and sometimes they devalue them precisely because of these connections.

Objects which play a prominent role within the ceremonial spheres of life in the Sepik and Ramu areas have been the subject of a great deal of attention by anthropologists interested in material culture and materiality. To my knowledge, however, less is known about the agency of objects of the female realm as they relate to everyday social and emotional life and how women's engagement with objects profoundly contributes to the maintenance of sociality (see Weiner, 1976). As I aim to show, the divergent meanings in relation to Nzari's objects mirror some of the creative ways in which women claim their position in a contemporary Ramu River world that has seen large-scale social, political, economic and religious transformations since the beginning of the last century. Thus, while the cultural contents, meanings, and values attached to these objects have been changing, the fact that the objects themselves continue to have agency within processes of cultural practice and production has not changed. Therefore, grasping women's valuations as well as devaluations of Nzari's objects in everyday life becomes an analytic means by which to better understand how these women feel about and think of wider societal transformations.

Bosmun – a Lower Ramu river world

The Bosmun area is located in a rural, tropical, and swampy lowland environment at the lower reaches of the Ramu River, Papua New Guinea's fifth largest river. The Lower Ramu flanks the Lower Sepik to the latter's southeast. The societies of both areas have had trading relationships with each other (e.g. A. Th. von Poser, 2015) and are known to share social, cultural, and political similarities as well as similar ecological conditions. Also, local cosmological narratives refer to various mythical ancestors, amongst them Nzari, who traversed the Sepik-Ramu inland area and thereby created the present world.

In 2004, when I began to conduct research in situ, the Bosmun area was populated by approximately 1500 individuals. Daiden, where I spent most of my time, was populated by about 200 individuals living in 41 households. In 2010, on one of my repeated visits, almost every household had at least one or two new infant members. As a result of Christian proselytization, which started in the area by the 1930s and during which ancestral customs such as the postpartum taboo of refraining from sexual intercourse were abandoned, Papua New Guinea has been faced with rapid population growth to a previously unknown extent (von Poser, 2017). In terms of food and shelter, people in the Bosmun area still adhered to a subsistence-based way of life. Women and men regularly process sago together and catch fish. The production of sago, the staple diet in the area, is based on gender-complementarity. Occasionally, men go on hunting trips. Women frequently gather all kinds of wild food plants, mushrooms, and edible grubs. Due to regular flooding, gardening in the area is rather sporadic.

As is the case all over the country, people here have also been participating in cash-based endeavors on a more regular basis as there are new necessities to generate a monetary surplus. People have to pay the obligatory project fees for their school children, who are now too numerous, it seems, to have any future perspective which relies on the limited grounds. People also invest money in order to prompt social, technological, and medical progress in this rather remote and rural part of the country. Attempts to create a prosperous local

tourist-art industry have been less fruitful compared to the neighbouring Sepik or coastal areas. Instead, old artefacts are sold, often for very little money, to buyers who drop by sporadically. Labor migration and mobility have been increasing, with almost every household having a family member who either works in town or regularly travels to trade areas along the North Coast road in order to sell copra or areca nut. Different to Sepik societies which saw huge labor migration by the 1990s, so that approximately half of the Sepik population live in (sub-)urban areas (Reuter, 2008: 16), it was at least my impression in the Bosmun area that people seem to have maintained more localized lives. This, however, does not mean that their lives are based only on pre-capitalist values. Constant mobility between the Ramu and coastal Bogia, the nearest town, or Madang town, permits people to participate in the capitalist economy. Women too take part, as they more or less regularly travel to sell fish, mussels, and prawns on the local market of Bogia. They thus maintain their role as important contributors to their household's well-being.

In 2010, the primary tenet of Bosmun social segmentation still was the division into moieties and patrilineal clans. Men are said to be rooted in the soil whereas women are compared to flying foxes. Correspondingly, the land is passed on from the father to the eldest of his sons, who is expected to redistribute parts of the inherited land righteously among himself and his younger brothers. It is also men who dig into the ground to erect households for their families and men's houses for their clans. Women are said to move between households and not to possess land since they can easily move, as flying foxes do. But they do have certain rights of access to and use of particular land tracts, that is, primarily sago and coconut areas, which are either planted for them or given to them. In general, mothers hand over those rights only to their daughters and nobody else is allowed to benefit without permission. As sago is considered the most valued food source in the area, women's particular access to it vests them with enormous social and political power. Every adult male has the right to express himself politically in the men's house. Whether he will be listened to is dependent upon whether he has already contributed gifts of cooked food to the men's house. The display of food, in turn, depends on one's kin members' willingness to support one's political endeavors. Prior to voicing one's ideas in the men's house, I was told, a speaker is likely to have aired these ideas in the shared cross-gender realm of the household. Being crucial food procurers, women, therefore, have considerable influence in the political arena. I became aware of the powerful role of women in society many times during fieldwork. One situation, for instance, exemplifies the important role of elderly women with regard to the transmission of local mythical knowledge on which rights to land and resources are based. One day, I sat with a group of middle-aged and elderly men to record a mythical story said to belong to the realm of male and secret knowledge. Interestingly, the men only began to recount the story after an old woman joined them, taking a seat in the middle of them and whispering details of the story into their ears.

Bosmun women, in fact, owe much of their power to the deeds of Nzari, who is also said to have played an active part in the physical and ideational creation of the world. The present-day land- and riverscape was once a huge seascape as both Bosmun cosmology and evidence based on archaeological research indicate (Swadling, 1990; Swadling and Hide, 2005). As a so-called traveling ancestor, Nzari is believed to have embarked on her journey from a place located between the Sepik and the Ramu and to have shaped rivers and rivulets as well as the nearby island of Manam, which in the Bosmun version of the story is said to be her last point of destination.

Nzari – the patroness of Bosmun womanhood

The story of Nzari, which I collected on several occasions between the years 2004 and 2010, is split into four episodes. With the exception of one episode in which Nzari appears as an old woman, a matured mother figure so to speak, she appears as a young, independent woman of exceptional beauty who is open to men's desires to get involved with her. It is, in fact, Nzari who approaches men first, and since she is in possession of love-controlling magic, her approaches are always successful.

Interestingly, every emotional moment in the story of Nzari is enacted by means of particular foodways. Culinary anthropologist Carole Counihan frames foodways as the

> "behaviors and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food." (1999: 6)

Grounding in Bosmun understandings of food-related action, my definition of the term also implies the emotional assessments that women and men make of food-related behaviors and practices (von Poser, 2013). In the first episode, which tells of her relationship with her first partner, Nzari beds their baby in a clay pot in which she also stirs sago. Later, when her partner fails to respond to her empathetically, she cuts the baby into pieces, cooks it, "returns" to him the "food" they once produced together, and abandons him.

In another episode, Nzari transforms her second partner into a human being by reshaping his body, by providing him with fire and showing him both how to prepare proper meals and how to engage in sexual intercourse, thus also marking the sexual

action as a civilized act. Following local mythology, there is a strong connection between shared food production/consumption, body symbolism, and sexual reproduction. The clay pot is said to have originated from Nzari's womb (for a homology between objects and wombs see also MacKenzie, 1991). Ontologically speaking, it emerged as an extension of her body. Indeed, Nzari brought all kinds of things into existence in the way female bodies bear babies – fire, fowl, pots, bowls, clubs, paddles –, and whenever she left a place, she would store them inside her body by swallowing them. Prior to its use as a cooking device, for instance, a newly made pot is still to be washed with herbal water. The same is done with the belly of a delivering woman in order to facilitate the birth. The herbs that are used stem from a specific tree. This tree usually stands in the vicinity of every household and is said to have been carried by Nzari when she appeared as a wise old woman in the third episode of the story. In this episode, she encounters a people who have no knowledge of female maturity or of what mature women look like because the women of this group have no knowledge of normal childbirth. The women always die in the presence of their husbands as they undergo a primordial form of the Caesarean section. Shocked upon seeing this, Nzari teaches women how to deliver. She builds the first birth-house, a private female abode in which she radiates her magic and from which she expels all men. Ever since, the birth-house, which was to be built in the vicinity of every single household even during the time of my research, serves as the most solidly expressed material manifestation of Nzari's endeavours. Furthermore, Nzari commands women to remain secluded from men (and sexually abstinent) until their children make their first attempts to crawl. She also marks sexual abstinence by a constraint with regard to sharing food with spouses.

It is also through Nzari that sentiment for the aged is introduced to humans. She is both the first "old woman" and the first "caring mother" humans encounter. For, as the myth purports, prior to her, men always lost their wives, sisters, and daughters. The last episode underpins the notion that it is only by means of respecting the old, caring woman who prepares food that Nzari is going to reveal her ultimate power and beauty to men. She encounters two brothers, and while the elder brother is disgusted by her appearance, the younger one feels sorry for her and takes her in. Feeling attached to him, Nzari changes back from old to young age. The brothers now start to fight and the quarrel culminates as both pull on Nzari while she is still balancing a food bowl on her head. Nzari finally decides to leave once more and heads towards Manam.

Materiality and women's engagement with Nzari's objects

Beyond narration, I came across Nzari's figure in various ways. Her story and the associated female power materializes in a number of objects: clay pots, wooden bowls, paddles, and clubs. It also materializes in the fire which humans use for heating and for transforming plants and animals into proper food. In what follows, I will shortly describe "Nzari's objects" before relating them to my empirical observations of how Bosmun women use them to express their emotions in agentive ways.

Clay pots

A highly important object to which I have already drawn attention is the cooking pot made of local clay. It is used to stir sago, which, according to local understandings, is said to be the ultimate source for appeasing one's hunger. Since Bosmun were the only society in the area with a pottery manufacture, taking the clay from a specific stream, they had a unique position and were therefore referred to as "mother" by adjacent groups. With the introduction of aluminum pots, saucepans, and enamel dishes, the Bosmun economic position in this regard has begun to diminish, at least in the sphere of daily activities. In extraordinary contexts – sometimes conflictual as we shall see below –, Bosmun clay pots continue to be a prerequisite, and neighbouring groups still order them (photo 1).

In her survey on pottery making in the Madang Province, Mennis (2006: 288) classified Bosmun

Photo 1. – Bosmun clay pots, 2005 (© Anita von Poser)

pottery as "[g]one but not forgotten." During the time of my research, it was not really "gone," however, Mennis' statement might soon become true. Women below the age of forty told me that they no longer knew how to produce the pots and that they had lost interest in learning how to make them. According to their growing involvement in cash-oriented economic activities, there was no time left for keeping the pottery tradition. Most of the women above the age of forty had learned pottery making in their youth but relied on the assistance of old women to refresh their skills.

As mentioned earlier, there was a homology between clay pots and wombs, and accordingly between fire and blood / vaginal fluids. Not only did the pot originate from Nzari's womb; fire, too, poured out of her. As good church attendees, my female interlocutors repeatedly told me that today nobody believes in the former spiritual heroines and heroes, especially with reference to local cosmological conceptions of body and sexuality. Despite this, however, the figure of Nzari was still very much salient, especially with regard to the appreciation of the transformative powers that wombs and clay pots were believed to have. I more than once came upon situations in which women would, as respected food-providers, exert power and express their emotions in a way similar to that of the figure of Nzari. During a household dispute, for instance, which involved conflicting opinions on the partner choice of one family member, I saw how an elder man finally revised his opinion because a young niece of his, having a different opinion, reminded him openly and loudly in front of many others that she was the one who prepared sago for him and that she was the one who cared for him. While shouting this, she was standing near to the household's hearth where clay pots are usually placed after meals have been cooked.

On another occasion, a fight between a couple took place in the open, with the husband eventually beating the wife. Shortly afterward, however, the wife stood up to take her equipment for fishing, including her paddle, and left the household uprightly without saying a word. Her father-in-law, whose company I was in as we witnessed the scene, immediately commented that she, in fact, had won the fight. Upon my interrogating, he said that she had reminded the husband of what he was probably going to lose should he beat her again.

Wooden bowls

Another highly important object relating to culinary practices, emotions, and Bosmun womanhood and power is the wooden bowl. Originally, fathers usually made them for their daughters, who later might hand them over to their own female offspring. Everyday culinary life in the Bosmun area was marked by the regular exchange of cooked food between households related by kinship. Today, women use enamel dishes in everyday exchange. For manifesting relations of special social and emotional relevance, however, the wooden bowls still remain a requisite of the highest importance.

Photo 2. – Blade of women's paddle, 2005 (© Anita von Poser)

During a fire that broke out during my first stay in the area, a woman was lucky to save the bowls her father had made for her when she was young and unmarried. Although she and her husband had to rebuild the entire household which had been destroyed by the fire, the most valued mementos of hers, she said, had survived. Another woman's wooden bowls did not survive the fire and she mourned them for days. Repeatedly, she told me and others in her surrounding that it was her husband who had failed to rescue the bowls as he had come home drunk after gambling. By referring to such highly prominent material objects – the wooden bowls her father had made for her and that now nobody could replace – she took the opportunity to emotionally assert herself in a relationship in which she and her children were suffering from the husband's compulsive gambling. Eventually, the husband asked a known carver to make new bowls as a sign of his excuse; he knew, however, that these bowls would serve his wife as a constant materialized reminder of his failure.

Paddles

Most prominent is the carved image of Nzari on the blade of women's paddles – as an abstract fe-

male body with straddled legs – giving birth to all kinds of things while on her journey (photo 2).

It is widely known for the Sepik and Ramu areas that images of mythical heroines with straddled legs such as those incorporated as gable sculptures were used to decorate architecture linked to the male ceremonial sphere (e.g. Schindlbeck, 1985: 363-411; Reuter, 2008: 14; Craig, 2010: 69-72). In the Bosmun area, Nzari's image seems also to have decorated men's paddles. There are two paddles in museum collections, which due to their relative length definitely fall into the Bosmun category of men's paddles, that are decorated with the image of Nzari.[1] Women's paddles in the Sepik and Ramu areas are shorter than men's paddles, as women usually sit whereas men usually stand while canoeing. The first one of the men's paddles, 276 cm long, collected by the Neu Guinea Compagnie in 1899, forms part of the collections of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin (Peltier, Schindlbeck & Kaufmann, 2015: 123). The second one, 212 cm long, was collected in the Bosmun area in 1970 and forms part of the Masterpiece collection of Papua New Guinea's National Museum:

> "Unfortunately, nothing is known of the significance of the figure carved on the blade or at the end of the handle." (Craig, 2010: 35)

Based on my ethnographic knowledge of the area, I would say that Nzari appears both on the blade and at the end of the handle, which shows a female body who carries a food bowl on her head, thus encapsulating the paramount pre-capitalist Bosmun value of moving through social space and thereby sharing food.

The women's paddles showing Nzari, which I saw during the time of my research, were mostly old and battered. As the costs for traveling by motor-boat are very high, daily river movement and transport still mostly rely on canoeing, and therefore women and men continue to have their own paddles. New paddles are being made, however, without the image of Nzari represented as a female body with straddled legs, as this image does not match the Christian ideals of womanhood and female embodiment. Despite the lack of the carved decorations of former times, the paddles are still imbued with agency in Gell's sense as shown by my reference to the woman who, after a physical assault by her husband, stood up to take her paddle and left in order to procure food, thus exerting considerable power over the husband.

String figures

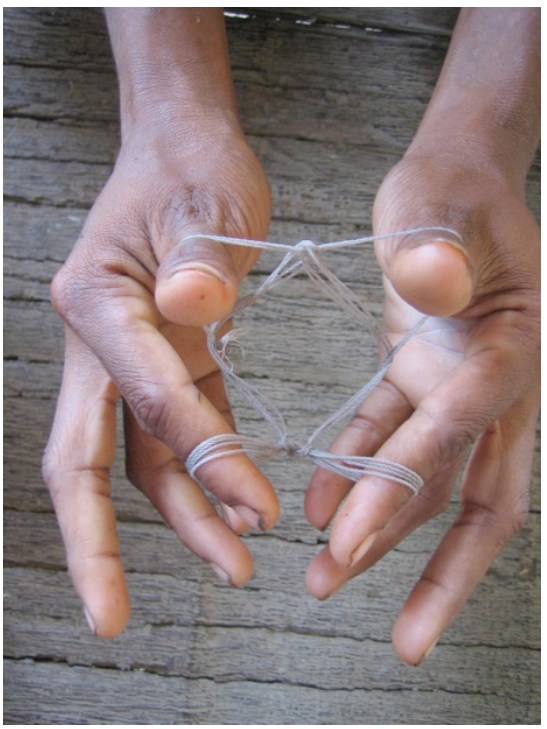
In string-figure games that are popular with women and children, Nzari's representation also turned up. The string figures that I saw were all personified or objectified and while shaping a string, women would tell and perform succinct tales. Using string figures also as a mnemonic device to store and evoke cultural memory (see also Vandendriessche, 2014), women taught children, especially girls, lessons on all kinds of social matters (photo 3).

Whenever I saw the particular string-figure game relating to Nzari being performed, it was accompanied by excited laughter, since performing women, while referring to distinct episodes in her story, moved this particular string body in an overt way so as to imitate sexual intercourse. During spontaneous and more private occasions, the issue of sexuality was purported to me as one of joy, creativity in terms of sexual and social reproduction, and power as female bodies and pots, according to Nzari, were considered loci of transformative and generative force. In formal public discourse, on the other hand, following the Christian tradition, the issue was to be avoided.

Clubs

The last category of Nzari's objects which I wish to address include clubs used by women when fighting against their female rivals. Women's fights have a long tradition in the Bosmun area and were first reported by the ethnographer and missionary Höltker (1969), based on his obser-

Photo 3. – String figure performance showing Nzari, 2006 (© Anita von Poser)



1. I would like to thank my husband-colleague Alexis Th. von Poser who drew my attention to these two paddles.

vations in 1937. Clubs as beautifully decorated as the one collected in the Ramu estuary in 1902 (Peltier, Schindlbeck & Kaufmann, 2015: 309), however, have become rare. I never saw a club of such stylistic beauty during my own research, but I did see women fighting and once I saw how they used clubs which were roughly two meters long. Female clubs are believed to be empowered by magic spells inherited by Nzari. The older the club, I was told, the more powerful it is and the more likely is the holder of a club to win the fight. A woman having won a fight is said to have "danced like a fowl," – the fowl being one of the animals that Nzari had brought into existence. Kinswomen accompany the rivals and are expected to intervene to prevent severe injuries. Men and children also watch such fights. The fight that I witnessed took place between two sisters who were infuriated because of an unequal distribution of food. As I saw, there was more gesticulation and verbal assault than direct club-fighting. Every time one of the women shouted or uttered incriminations she would wave her club in the direction of the other, who would try to ward off the strike with her own club. It was as if both raised their clubs so as to underpin their words with the sound of the colliding clubs. Neither got hurt, and after half an hour the fight came to an end with the sisters reuniting again.

Interestingly, one of the sisters, a younger woman among my female interlocutors, usually and quite openly criticized the female customs as linked to Nzari, especially those associated with the compulsion to remain secluded for several months in a birth-house after the delivery of a child. The woman said with sincerity:

> "I am tired of this custom. I will not incarcerate myself this way."

She belonged to a family who regularly attended church service and who often condemned "all things ancestral" in public local discourse. The young woman's refusal to follow Nzari's lore pertaining to giving birth, however, was also triggered by her obvious disinterest in her in-laws, who were known to be among those families who still respected many, if not all, ancestral customs. According to virilocal rules of residence, the woman was expected to live in the household of her in-laws, but she had objected to this from the onset of her relationship with her partner. He instead lived in the household of her family. The woman's refusal to reside in a birth-house made her in-laws upset and worried.

In her demand for a birth-house, Nzari created the basis for a formalized and solidly expressed appreciation of motherhood and female generative power. This idea was still ingrained in the verbal and lived deeds of the middle-aged and elderly women whom I talked to. In search of a life that navigates toward modernity, many young women are gradually ceasing to copy the ancestral images of womanhood, female embodiment, and power. Such a transition, however, does not happen abruptly. The young woman who was not willing to give birth in the birth-house, for instance, proudly continued to use the club, even when everyone claimed that a fight can only be won if one's club has been empowered by the spirit of Nzari.

Conclusion

Materiality is an ever-changing phenomenon; I hope to have conveyed this in my exploration of the relations between material forms, emotions, and female agency in the Bosmun area. These changes unfold as processes within contextualized settings. Depending on specific situations in life as well as specific roles that women variously come to perform over the courses of their lives as businesswomen, church attendees, and/or household members in daily family life, they interchangeably value and devalue Nzari's objects and the related ideals and practices. Materiality is being creatively evaluated by the women, individually or collectively, yet always according to what the situation demands.

Anthropology's engagement with material forms is crucial because the lens on materiality lends itself as an essential analytic tool to grasp societal, political as well as emotional dynamics and the related discourses, practices, and embodied experiences that are involved (Lemonnier, 2012). Rather than fatalistically stating that the knowledge of Nzari which was once so prominently attributed to various female-related objects will soon be forgotten in the Bosmun area, a process-oriented perspective on materiality allows me to suggest that, once women and men see the need to maintain or recover this knowledge, for whatever reasons, they will probably do so. Ethnographically, I hope to have provided illustrations which underline my suggestion. Take, for instance, the young woman who exerted power over her uncle by reminding him of her role as an important food procurer of the family, thus making clear reference to the ideal and pre-capitalist image of the "caring woman" as embodied by the figure of Nzari. Take the woman who denied to deliver her child in the birth-house according to ancestral conventions, but who did not hesitate to rely on the magical powers of Nzari when she had to win a fight against her sister. Take the women who, in playing string-figure games, continue to teach girls lessons on sexuality and the female body as linked to the deeds of Nzari, thus, in fact, keeping and transferring to the next generations specific notions that do not integrate well into the public female discourse as

impacted by Christian morality. Thus, while assigning different layers of meaning and different ways of action to different material forms, my female interlocutors in the Bosmun area all made use of (the knowledge of) objects to give expression to emotional processes as based on the

> "dialogicality of culture and history, pointing to contrary moralities and identities within the self as well as between different historical forms of what it is to be a person." (Silverman, 2005: 97)

Most recently, environmental activism has been developing in the area. Melchior Ware, one of my closest interlocutors in Ndongon, another Bosmun place, has mostly been involved in raising an awareness in his area of the need to counter ongoing land and resource exploitation from outside agendas now operating all over Papua New Guinea. Also, he has been successful in joining larger environmental protection projects that bring together different "indigenous voices" (Letman, 2016). As I remember from many conversations, Melchior's vision, parts of which are conveyed in a short documentary called *Guardians of the River* and filmed in the Bosmun area by Sacred Land Film Project (2010), included a thoughtful incorporation of the ancestral ways of living, such as ecologically considerate food procurement, into modernity. Similar to the Sepik area, people in the Ramu area continue to variously refer to what they consider

> "tradition in order to modernize their society and selves." (Silverman, 2005: 92)

It remains to be seen what kind of agency Nzari's objects will unfold in this new and highly politicised context of appropriating materiality.

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